

Into Eternity by hexlibris

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Summary:

Four times it stays in the dark, where it belongs, and one time it doesn't.

Into Eternity

i.

The first time it happens, it almost comes as a surprise, but not really. If Billy were to be honest with himself, he'd say that they've been dancing around it for weeks.

He's rarely honest with himself, though. Especially when it comes to Steve Harrington.

It happens, as many of these things do, at someone's twenty-first birthday. This time it's Eden Cawthorn's, although once Billy gets going he could give less of a fuck whether it's Eden or the Pope hosting the proceedings. He's on cloud nine, soaring down a cosmic highway of cocaine-induced high harvested from the sweeping plains of Laurie Powell's cheerleader-toned stomach. The crackling of the blow in his blood harmonizes with the phantom scrape of his father's knuckles from the night before; a gleeful, red-tinged choir. He collects and displays the bruises like the Boy Scout badges he's never had, because Neil says the Boy Scouts are run by kiddie-diddling fags; wears them loud and brash and proud to match the rest of him. Laurie, the dumb bitch, says they make him look dangerous. Billy tells her he was in a fight. Tells her, *you should see the other guy*. He has a role to play, and sometimes it's easier for him to pretend.

He manages to escape Laurie, all giggly and spaced-out and half-naked in the master bedroom, and slips back outside for another beer. Someone's foolishly left a cooler open underneath Eden's outdoor gazebo (apparently gazebos are a thing rich people have now) and Billy rummages through it like a man on a mission, searching frantically for his next hit—because he's gotta have it, he's gotta keep driving down that cosmic highway, otherwise he'll explode—when something makes him glance up.

At first, he's not sure what he's looking at—he sees the bank of trees that mark the beginning of the woods just past the gazebo, and the darkness beyond that, stretching like the mouth of a waiting animal. Then a tree moves and he sees the figure of Steve Harrington, standing with his back to the party, his back to the light, a cigarette

dangling loosely from his fingertips and his face tilted upwards, drinking in the milk-pale luminosity of the moon.

Of all the uncertainties in Billy's life—his dad's moods, as unpredictable and changeable as the wind; his relationship with Max, which is sometimes up but mostly down, six-feet underground; his own sense of equilibrium, which was blown off course when he left California and since then Billy can't seem to right himself (he always feels like he's got vertigo, or water in his ears, something that's making him seeing the world double)—out of all these variables in his uncertain, wavering existence in the world, the only constant that remains is Steve Harrington.

Which is weird, because they haven't spoken a word to each other since Billy—*snapped*, as his father would say. (Neil tells Billy: *you fuckin' push my buttons again, I'm gonna snap, and you know I'm not responsible for what happens when I snap*). They don't talk to each other, but Harrington's always *there* nonetheless, hovering in the corner of Billy's eye—blink and you miss it. He brushes up against Billy in the hallways between classes, ghost-like; seems to pass right through him on the court; slips into the desk next to him in English without a sound—gone again before Billy can turn and acknowledge him.

It's maddening—Harrington seems like the only real, substantial thing in Billy's life, but he's also *not real*. Even at house parties like this one they circle each other relentlessly, until Billy gets distracted or Nancy Wheeler distracts Steve, pulls him aside like she's his fuckin' mom and he's done something to disappoint her. Whatever it is that's between them doesn't break, though; it expands and contracts, but it doesn't break. Billy can feel himself being drawn inexplicably closer; he's always wanted what he can't have. The need to reach out and *hold* Steve, to demand that he himself be seen, rattles around in his bones like something knocked loose, and he can't stand it anymore, so he closes that gap—

—*leaps* across it more like, slipping one hand around Harrington's waist and the other over the cigarette in his hand. Harrington was still as stone before, so still Billy thought he was a tree, but he comes to life now, leaning back into the circle of Billy's arms, his smile like a knife pressed against Billy's cheek. Billy thinks he's flying high, too,

soaring down his own cosmic highway of a thousand dripping rainbow colors. The Steve Harrington he knows wouldn't let himself be touched like this in the light of day, not in a million years.

It's different, in the dark. There are no roles for them to play, no need to pretend. Billy grips Steve and sucks on the cigarette in one deep breath. Holds it. He doesn't ask Harrington *what's a pretty thing like you doing in a place like this*, even though it's expected of him, part of the role he has to play. Girls like a boy who's bad—a boy who's dangerous. All that shit sounds kind of stupid in his head, now. He's not sure what Harrington likes—but he doesn't think it's *that*.

One deep breath, all the way down to his fingers and toes. The forest seems to breathe with him, as if to ask, *will he? Won't he?*

Breathe in. Hold. Hold. Let yourself be held.

Harrington is silent, too, even as Billy palms him through the crotch of his jeans and skates the fingers of his other hand under his shirt, seeking a nipple. Harrington doesn't say anything, but he doesn't need to. He's hard against Billy's hand, the skin on his chest and stomach burning as if in fever; his teeth worry at Billy's pulse, dangerous in a whole other sense. It's different with girls; Billy's always liked to watch them when he slides home between their legs, the way their eyes roll up in their sockets with delighted ecstasy. *Look at me*, he'll order when he's close, and when they oblige him he comes almost instantly, almost always. With Harrington he can't do any of that—with Harrington, it stays secret, stays in the dark where it belongs. Billy's not stupid, though. He doesn't need to see Harrington's face to do this. People are all the same in the dark. Just skin on skin.

When Harrington comes, it's with an escaped rush of air, like he'd been holding his breath, too. His lips pass over Billy's jaw in a shadow of a kiss—not quite—and then he's straightening up, turning back to the trees, turning back to stone. Billy doesn't mind. He's gone before Steve can notice that he stole his cigarette. Billy returns back the house, back to where it's so light and bright and loud it's almost a system overload after being swallowed up by the darkness outside, where Laurie welcomes him with another line—this time from the lofty summit of her tits—and it's like he never left.

If anyone asks you, he didn't.

ii.

The next time it happens—there's always a *next time* with Harrington, hanging in the air like an unfinished sentence—Billy's not high, but he sure is drunk. It's been a while since Neil snapped at him; he seems to go through cycles where he's sweet as pie towards Billy, ruffling his hair, coming home with packs of his favorite brand of cigarettes, inviting him to watch the game on the big TV they have down at the Hideaway—even calling him *Buster*, a nickname he hasn't used since Billy was a boy. Billy knows it's not gonna last, but he can't just fucking sit and wait for Neil to snap. He *needs* it right now, needs that next burst of a high to keep him going. If Neil won't give it to him, then he'll take it from somewhere else.

Billy's drunk and driving too fast on the loose gravel road that leads up to the quarry. The plan for the night is crude but simple: continue to drink himself into a partial homeostasis and set off the cherry bombs he bought from Pete Merrill behind Melvald's. Tommy said he'll join him, but it depends on how Carol feels. Tommy said he's got a couple of M-80s marinating in his dad's garage, but Billy won't believe it until he sees it. Which isn't likely; fuckin' Carol and her fuckin' PMS.

He reaches the crest of the hill, where the road ends in a two-hundred-foot drop into the void, and pulls the Camaro to an abrupt halt. Takes another deep breath.

"Howdy," Steve says, like this is perfectly normal, like they're just two people passing each other in the street—*hey man, how's it going? Yeah, good thanks, and yourself?*—and Billy doesn't know who Steve thinks he's fooling. Nothing about this is normal.

"Are you stalking me?" he asks.

"Could ask you the same question," says Steve. Billy can't quite see his face, and that's a blessing; seeing Harrington's face would force him to confront head-on what they did. All that he can see is that

Steve is perched on the hood of his BMW, the flashlight in his fist beaming up into the starry blanket of the sky above them in lightning-like forks.

“I asked you first,” Billy says. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

The light changes as Steve adjusts the angle of the flashlight, shining it on the title of the book he’s got in his lap. *Ground Zero: Oppenheimer & The Fall of Hiroshimatrumpets* out at Billy in patriotic red, blue, and white letters. “Reading about the end of the world,” Steve says.

It’s a warm night, but something in his tone makes Billy feel cold. They’ve been learning about the Manhattan Project in history class. The textbook talks about J. Robert Oppenheimer like he’s the second coming of Christ, but to Billy he just sounds like a genocidal madman, with a god complex to rival Neil’s. *Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds*. That bit alone had scared Billy, when he’d first read it; it’d scared him so badly he had to skip the rest of the period to go smoke behind the bleachers.

“I didn’t know we had to do more readings,” he says.

“You don’t,” says Steve, lowering the flashlight until his face is closed in darkness and Billy feels safe to look up again, “I do. Not everyone can bullshit their way to an A.”

He sounds a little mean, resentful, and Billy wonders if this is Harrington’s way of picking a fight with him, out of all the possible ways. That’s unfair, he thinks; for once, it’s not even his fault that Harrington’s slipping. Billy wouldn’t call himself *smart* in the traditional sense, but writing comes easy to him, as does debate. It’s all a matter of persuasion—and he’s always been good at persuading people. *Your boy could talk the Devil into going to church*, Mrs. Gale, his fifth grade English teacher, told Neil once. It’s by far the nicest thing any adult’s ever had to say about him.

“You know,” Steve says, thoughtful now, “sometimes I really hate you, Hargrove.”

“You and me both, sweetheart. Turn that light off,” he orders, when

Steve moves the flashlight in his direction; the light hovers uncertainly for half a second, then disappears as Steve flicks the switch.

Of course, persuasion only works if you understand your audience. Different strokes for different folks. Billy doesn't quite understand Steve Harrington, but he's getting there—slowly picking up all the pieces of him that are scattered in the wind, finding the ones that seem to match and sliding them together. He understands, on a basic level, that Steve's ravenous, just as he is. When you look at it like that—through the simplest, most primal lens of human behavior—you can kind of see how they're made for each other, in a fucked up sort of way.

"What are we doing?" Steve says.

Not *you*, but *we*; Billy lets the distinction swirl and shift in the air between them like smoke as he sidles up to the BMW, planting his hands firmly on Steve's knees, squeezing until he feels Steve's muscles vibrate in response. "You talk too much," he says.

Steve's words melt and stick together into a breathy moan in his ear: "Coming from *you*."

Billy pauses for a moment to savor his victory—of Harrington trapped beneath him, with nowhere to run, nowhere to hide—before dropping to his knees.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" Steve hisses from somewhere above him. "You wanna get us both killed?"

"We won't if you keep quiet," says Billy, pulling roughly at his ankles until Steve slides down, Nikes landing on the ground on either side of Billy's knees. The flashlight falls, too, but Billy bats it away before Harrington can bend to pick it up. "And if we keep that fuckin' light off."

"Oh, Christ." Steve all but doubles over as Billy works at his zipper, pulling his dick out of his briefs and giving it an experimental tug. Something slides through his hair and Billy realizes it's Steve's fingers sinking into his scalp, touching him with a care that borders on—

reverence, maybe, he's not sure. Again, it's different with girls: Billy never lets them touch his hair. *Billy's* the one who touches—pulling on ponytails to expose the delicious lines of their throats, biting into shoulder blades, pinching at nipples and slapping asses and gripping their chins until they're forced to *look at him*. "Please," Harrington whispers, and Billy thinks that as long as Harrington speaks to him like that—worshipful, awed, just *begging* for it—he'll let him get away with anything.

Billy pulls back, steadying the movement of Harrington's hips with strong fingers. "Fuck my mouth," he says.

He can't see Steve's face, thank God, but he can feel the just-perceptible tightening of the fingers in his hair, turning like screws. Steve's ravenous and Billy's found his next hit; they could take bites out of each other forever like this, like a snake devouring its own tail. "Billy—"

"*Fuck*," Billy raises his hand and brings it down on the back of Steve's thigh with a muffled *whap*; Steve's dick jerks involuntarily against his jaw, smearing his lips with pre-come, "my mouth."

Harrington's pelvis nudges forwards almost shyly, his grip loosening in Billy's curls—far too gentle for Billy's liking, so he raises his hand again and gives Harrington another hard slap, this time on his right ass cheek. "Shitgoddamnmotherfucker," Steve gasps, all in one breath, and Billy smiles briefly, smugly, around his cock before swallowing it down, using the graceful jut of Harrington's hip bones as anchors for them both: squeezing hard, challenging him to fucking *move* already.

Finally, Steve does. It's not as brutal as Billy's used to, but it's messy—messier than he expected for a guy who looks like he irons his polo shirts with meticulous care every day before school. Steve's fingers open and close in Billy's hair as he ruts forwards, his dick punching between Billy's lips with obscene, sloppy eagerness. "I hate you," he pants through gritted teeth, "I hate you, I hate you, I hate you."

"Jesus, Steve, don't stop," Billy says thickly, as Steve pulls back for another thrust, "I'll fuckin' die if you stop now, baby."

Steve shudders in his mouth and although Billy can't see him, he can still feel him. That's the fascinating thing about fucking in the dark: in the absence of sight, all other senses are heightened. He feels Steve on every secondary level, from auditory to tactile to olfactory, and it's more intense in a way; headier. Steve's louder when he comes this time; Billy has to wrap both arms around the small of his back to stop him from toppling over and sending them both crashing to the ground. Steve holds him by the nape of the neck, pulling his hair so hard his scalp burns with pain, but it's a good pain, just the kind Billy needs.

"That wasn't so difficult, now was it?" he says. His knees are bloody in his jeans from kneeling on the gravel for such a long time. Billy will add the scars to his collection; if anyone asks, he'll say he got into a fight.

"You—" Steve begins, but Billy never hears the rest of it. A second later, a bright light spills across the sheer cliff-face behind them; Tommy's truck bounces around the corner, giving them just enough time to retreat hastily from one other—reverting back to circling, never touching, and if Tommy thinks it's odd that Steve Harrington's all the way out here, he knows better than to voice that thought aloud.

"Christmas came early," he says to Billy. To Billy's pleasant surprise, he not only has an M-80, but several Roman Candles and even some Catherine wheels. Then Tommy, because he's *Tommy*, almost ruins the surprise in one fell swoop:

"I call this one 'Little Boy'," he tells them about the M-80, with a donkey-like bray of laughter. "We're gonna have a mini-Hiroshima here tonight, gents—"

Billy suddenly feels bottomless, like his legs have fallen away, leaving him gouged wide open. It's during uncertain moments like these where, to compensate for the lack of control, he will do something truly unforgivable—oh, you thought threatening *Sinclair* was bad? Just sit tight, wait and see—

Distantly he hears Steve say angrily: "Don't joke about that man, Jesus," and that's what pulls him back. Steve, constant, reorienting

him like he's true north. Hold. Hold. Release.

iii.

The third time it happens, it's not a surprise—more like the inevitable outcome of two pathways converging back into each other's airspace. This time, it's Steve who pulls Billy into a slingshot orbit so that they're on matching trajectories, Steve who calls Billy and asks him, in that casual, *hey man how's it going?* way of his, what time he's dropping Max off at the arcade. Billy's not stupid; they both know what Steve's really asking.

The third time, Steve follows Billy back to his dad's place after they've each deposited their respective charges downtown. Billy can't remember who it was that said Steve Harrington's turned bitch thanks to Wheeler's interference, but as Steve goes down on him in the cobwebby darkness of his dad's shed—with his dad less than forty feet away inside the main house—he wants to kick himself for ever believing such a pile of horseshit. Steve is giving him a blow job in *Neil Hargrove's* shed. It reminds Billy of his own mortality in a way that nothing else has ever done before, not even blow, or driving while drunk; not even goading Neil into snapping, which is a walk in the park in comparison. Steve's grounding him all over again, tethering him back to Earth by reminding him how fucking *fragile* it all is, that Neil could come crashing through the door at any moment.

It's exhilarating.

"You're so fuckin' wet," murmurs Steve, from somewhere below. "You ever get this wet with girls? Or just me?"

"Just you," Billy says, without thinking, but he's too close to the edge to give a shit. Steve's as messy at giving head as he is taking it; drooling and gasping around Billy's dick like the specter-Steve from his wet dreams, and it's near perfect, Billy's *so close*—

"Wish I could see you," Steve says, and Billy feels his orgasm careen abruptly to a halt.

"I'm not gay," he says; his hands have frozen in Steve's hair, and even

as the words leave his mouth he knows it's a mistake, but he can't take them back. It's easy to pretend that Steve's just a convenient hole, because they never fuck with the lights on; easy to just get his kicks and leave, when it's dark. In the dark, you don't even have to look at yourself, let alone the other person.

"Then what are you?"

"I—" Billy grunts, knees bucking underneath him as Steve starts fucking him pitilessly with his mouth, using hands and tongue and lips and even his teeth, scraping them along the underside of Billy's dick until the wheels start to turn again and he's whining in desperate, embarrassing protest: "Fuck, Harrington, slow down, I'm gonna—I can't, I'm gonna c-come—"

But Steve doesn't slow down, doesn't relent; he's greedy, merciless, punishing Billy for his transgressions, and Billy knows he should probably apologize but—but no, that's not right. Steve knew what he was getting into; he knows that when you take the leap, eventually you're gonna crash into something on the other side, because that's the wicked way of the world, the law of the jungle—

"Oh, fuck," groans Billy; he presses Steve's head down with his hand until his cock hits the wall of his throat, feels Steve's jaw widen exquisitely to accommodate him, and it's this—different from girls, who always pull away at the last moment—that has him losing it, spilling straight down Steve's gullet. "*Jee-sus*. You're somethin' else."

"Yeah," Steve says. Vaguely, Billy hears him stand up, hears the rustle of denim as Steve brushes himself off. He can't see but his mind supplies the images for him, stringing them together like separate stills in a film reel: Steve, his mouth twisting at the thought of how dirty and crumpled his clothes are; Steve, his hair twisted into mad-scientist spikes thanks to Billy's fingers; Steve, neck crimson from arousal, of being flush with Billy's body in such a cramped space; Steve, sleepy and smiling in the afterglow. These images fill him with a hollow sort of ache that he can't quite explain, and he thinks of Nancy Wheeler, who's actually seen Steve in all these ways and more; but that's not—that's not what *this* is.

"Yeah," Steve says again, and suddenly he's pushing Billy away from

him. "I'm not gay, either."

The door to the shed seems to swing open of its own accord, and Steve—who's naught but a shadow, in this darkness—turns his back on Billy, steps outside. The shadow lengthens, growing taller and taller across the long grass of his step-mom's lawn, until it joins all the other shadows, the ones cast by the trees. By the time Billy steps outside himself, Harrington's gone and it's just the trees, silent and faceless, branches brushing at his cheeks like the accusatory fingers of a jury.

*

"Buster," Neil says.

His eyes are glued to the TV, but Billy knows they're not really paying attention to what's in front of him. Neil Hargrove has this way of seeing people without looking at them, of being omnipotent without even needing to turn his head.

It reminds Billy of a documentary he saw once about Australian saltwater crocodiles. They're apex predators, saltwater crocodiles, and they rely on the element of surprise to prey on fish, marsupials, birds—children, too. Human children, who come to the rivers to play and then get snatched off the shore when they least expect it, never to be seen again. Other apex predators, like sharks, are opportunistic hunters, but the saltwater crocodiles watch their victims for days, camouflaging themselves in the water and quietly biding their time until the right moment comes along. When it does, it's quick—too quick to put up a fight, too quick to run.

Neil's quiet like that, too; his face is smooth, unreadable, and Billy will say to himself, *okay, I'm in the clear* ... until that calm surface changes, lickety-split. Something in the reptilian eyes flickers, and Billy will realize, horribly, that he was being watched all along.

"Yes, dad?"

He forces himself to look back over his shoulder. Neil hates it when he doesn't meet his gaze; calls it *unmanly*, says it makes him hard to trust.

“Come give your old man a good night kiss,” Neil says, and fuck, Billy’s still wet in his jeans and his dad *knows*, he could always seem to smell it on him, Billy’s guilt and his shame, the boys down in California—

For a moment, his mind veers in the other direction; for a moment, he considers leaning down and whispering into his father’s ear: *I’ve just had my cock in Steve Harrington’s mouth. What do you think of that, you miserable, hateful old fuck?*

It’s a thought he’s never had before, and it scares him, because that’s not what this is, either. In the movies it would be. In the movies, Neil would be in prison by now; maybe he’d even be dead. But that’s an even worse sin than being a fag, wishing your dad dead ... so Billy shoves it aside, back in the dark where it belongs.

“I love you,” he says, and kisses Neil’s stubbly cheek.

One quick peck, and he’s turning on his heel, trying not to break into a run for the hallway—if he does Neil will snap for sure—

“And Susan,” his father says softly.

Susan’s curled up on the sofa across from them with a ball of yarn in her lap, but her own eyes are still fixed resolutely on the TV, half a world away. If Billy were to open his mouth and scream, she wouldn’t even hear him, he’s sure of that.

But Billy Hargrove doesn’t scream. Billy Hargrove was raised better than that, at least.

“Good night, Susan,” he says, and steps across to plant a kiss against the crown of her flyaway hair. She smells like laundry soap and cooking, which he supposes is a mom smell, but it’s not like he would know. He hasn’t had a mother in years.

“Honey, you’re shaking,” she says.

Breathe, Billy tells himself. His hands curl into defensive fists at his sides. “Low blood sugar, I guess.”

“Maybe you’re dehydrated,” Neil says. “Have you been drinking

enough water?”

“Sometimes,” says Billy; it’s getting harder and harder to talk, “sometimes I forget.”

Another thing about Neil’s eyes: they don’t blink, not even when the light hits them. “You taking care of yourself, Buster?”

“Sure.” The lies seem to burn his tongue coming out: “I always do.”

He doesn’t run, no matter how badly he wants to; he just turns and walks out of the room, down the hallway, past Max’s door, with its hand-drawn paper sign that says EAT DIRT SHITBIRD which Billy considers ripping down but then doesn’t, because if he does then his dad will hear the sound and investigate. When he reaches the very end of the hall, he realizes what the shakiness is. Not for himself—Billy doesn’t give a damn about *himself*, nor the myriad ways in which Neil could break him, but—

—but *Steve*, on the other hand, is something to lose. It’s no longer about Billy and what he wants, what he needs.

This thought gives him an even bigger scare than the thought of Neil dying, of J. Robert Oppenheimer and the atomic bomb—*now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds*—and when he finally makes it to his room he closes the door and sags down to the floor with his arms around his knees, like a child who’s just woken up from a bad nightmare. Tries to breathe in through his nose and out through his mouth, but without something to reorient him—

He’s there for a while.

iv.

Steve’s pissed at Billy, but he comes back for a fourth helping less than a week later. Billy, who has what Neil calls an *addictive personality*, understands more than Harrington will ever know. Steve chews on him like he’s a tough old bone; digs his heels in and chews

and chews, like he's trying to figure out how to crack him open to get to the marrow, where it's the tastiest, the most tender.

The fourth time, Steve sinks his teeth deep into Billy, going straight for the jugular; he climbs in through Billy's window after midnight when Neil and Susan are asleep and Max—God fucking forbid, if she isn't asleep yet like Billy told her to be, he's gonna let her have it, he's gonna snap—

"Come on," Steve growls in his ear. He tugs at the collar of Billy's shirt like he wants to fight him; presses his mouth to Billy's earring and *pulls* until Billy hisses in either pain or pleasure, he can't tell anymore. "Come on, come *on*."

They're fumbling in the dark of Billy's room. Billy feels wobbly and confused in a way that's almost like being drunk; it's the lack of light, the lack of any sense of what's up and what's down. This ain't right, he thinks to himself, he needs to put a stop to it, because Neil's worse than the atomic bomb, and Billy fucking hates that he suddenly cares so much about shielding Harrington from the fallout. But then Steve shoves his shirt up over his head and licks a hot stripe down to his navel and Billy forgets all about caring, because that *tongue*—

"Billy?"

There's a *click*, and the light flicks on above their heads. Billy shoves Steve away in an instant, gazing wildly over his shoulder at the doorway. Max is standing there, holding a mug of something that steams in her hands. "*Steve?*" she says, her eyes going wide.

"Mad Max." Steve's voice is a nervous squeak as he straightens up. "Uh—howdy."

"What are you two doing?" she asks, her head turning slowly between them both. Billy watches as her knuckles turn paler and paler around the mug she's holding, her eyes going wide, then narrowing to slits. They've only lived together as brother and sister for a year, but already Max is taking on some of his traits, slowly changing into something lean and cunning and wolfish.

"I told you to go to bed," he says, and she shoots him a mutinous

look, her mouth opening to either swear at him, or scream for Neil—

“It’s okay,” Steve says quickly. “I’ll just—I’ll just go.”

He steps forward to move past Max, to leave through the door, when Billy says, “No.”

Steve stops dead, looking around him—it’s the first time they’ve seen each other properly, in the flesh, since this all started. Under the light, Harrington looks more than ravenous—he looks sick. Days-old stubble carpets his jaw and chin, and his eyes stare out at Billy like the eyes of something hiding under a rock, dark and sunken and glittering. There’s hope in that darkness, Billy realizes suddenly, with awful, sinking comprehension—hope, because of *him*.

That pisses him off even more than the fact that Max disobeyed him outright. What the fuck does Steve think this is? Fuckin’ *Sixteen Candles*? They’re anything *but* that, but it’s almost like Steve has convinced himself of an alternate reality where this is fuckin’ normal and anything’s possible. Billy wants to spit on him for it. *Fuck* Steve Harrington and the stupid, puppy-dog look of hope in his eyes. Billy’s going to ruin that hope for him, just like he ruined his face.

He nods curtly to the window, and Steve’s expression seems to collapse inwards like a punctured lung. “See you around, Hargrove,” he says, and slides back past Billy—taking care not to touch him, like *Billy’s* the one who’s sick—throwing one leg over the window sill and jumping down onto the grass outside. Just like that, Steve’s gone all over again, sucked back into the night and Billy’s left cold, wanting. Left to live with the dregs of himself.

“We were—studying,” he says, before Max can speak.

“In the dark?” Her voice is hard. “Billy—”

Her hand closes around his wrist, and Billy snaps—throwing her backwards with furious strength, so that she’s grappling with the corner of his desk for support, the contents of her mug splashing across his bare chest. Billy presses his lips together as his skin starts to redden and blister, biting down the scream that’s trying to force its way out of his throat. “Don’t,” he whispers, half-strangled, agonized.

“One fucking word, and you’ll be drinking your food out of a straw for the rest of your life.”

Her teeth find his knuckles and she bites down, making him recoil. “I wasn’t going to say *anything*, you psycho,” she snarls.

“I fucking told you to go to bed,” he repeats. His own teeth at her throat, ready to rip it out. God knows Billy needs something soft and hot-blooded to bury himself in, after this.

Max looks him in the eye, firm and unafraid. “If you hurt Steve—”

“You’ll do what? Drug and castrate me? Sick all your weirdo friends on me?” he sneers at her, laughing. “Ooooh, I’m *terrified*.”

“I’m not threatening you,” she says in a placating tone, like she’s trying to calm a vicious animal. “I’m just saying—if you break Steve’s heart, that’s on you.”

That’s not what Billy was expecting her to say at all. He quickly gathers himself, aiming a retort like it’s a poison dart: “What if he breaks my heart, huh? What will you say then? That I deserved it? Because I’m me?”

“He won’t,” she says, and he doesn’t miss the bitterness creeping into her voice. “*Nothing* ever fazes you, Billy. You’re untouchable.”

As good with the written word as he is, Billy doesn’t know how to tell her that she’s wrong, because scars are sometimes more than surface level. There are scars that are easily spotted, like black eyes and split lips, and then there are scars that are invisible to the naked eye, the ones that are ingrained, deeply psychological. Max is too young to understand that, and he doesn’t know how to say it in a way that she *can* understand. Like most kids her age, Maxine Mayfield views the world in black and white; whoever is Bad gets punished, and whoever is Good does not. Billy’s always been the bad guy in his step-sister’s life, no ifs or buts about it. It’s a role that was assigned to him without his consent, but he plays it well, so what else does she want him to do?

“Get back to bed,” he mutters. “Don’t let me catch you outside of

your room after dark again. You hear me, brat? *Get back to bed.*”

When she’s gone, he looks down at the mug, at the places on his chest where the hot chocolate burned him. A single marshmallow still floats on the surface, melted halfway to jelly, and Billy realizes, too late, what it’s supposed to be: a peace offering, a bridge built and quickly burned.

Yet another thing he has to apologize for.

v.

Laurie Powell’s stopped answering his calls.

Billy doesn’t get it. Most girls he meets are attracted to him because they want to *fix* him. Their piss-poor self-esteem and pathological need for validation makes them easy targets for guys like him, guys who cruise on the outskirts of the pack, waiting to snap up the weak and the sickly in their jaws. These girls convince themselves that, since he’s the one chasing *them*, they alone are special enough to make him see the error of his ways; that they’ll be *that* woman someday, the one who loved bad boy Billy Hargrove so much he turned good.

Billy’s happy to let them enjoy this pathetic fantasy as long as he gets what he needs, which fluctuates most frequently between blow and pussy. Laurie Powell is—was—perfect for him in that sense, and Billy thought that that’s what they were—but then, out of nowhere, she goes cold on him.

Billy’s not used to being ignored. Not by Laurie, who he thought was just like all those other girls, the ones that see him as something to be tamed. He’s possibly met his match: a female version of himself who uses people and then drops them, when it suits her.

It’s also possible that Laurie’s gotten wind of what game he’s playing. Seen right through his act, as if he’s as transparent as he’s always feared.

It pisses him off, and in retaliation he picks a fight with his father, right in the middle of Mulberry Street. Tells Neil to go fuck himself and then braces for the inevitable bend and *crack*, like a wishbone splitting neatly in two.

Neil doesn't disappoint. He never does, not when Billy asks for it.

He slams the door of the Camaro on Billy's hand as Billy steps out of the passenger seat. When passers-by rush over, drawn by Billy's yelp of pain, Neil tells them it was an accident—that he didn't see Billy's hand, that he wasn't even looking when he closed the door.

They don't go to the hospital. Billy's fingers swell up to the size of sausages, the nails of the last three digits turning black with blood—his middle and ring fingers broken, maybe—but Neil doesn't take him to the hospital. They have an unspoken agreement—no hospitals, because the last time Billy went to a hospital, the nurse called the cops. Said it's child abuse, the way Neil treats him.

It's not abuse, Billy thinks, as he cradles his maybe-broken hand and weaves along the banks of Eel Race River towards Laurie's house. He's going to try climb in through her window—be all romantic and surprise her, because girls like it when he takes charge. It's not abuse if he starts the fights. He always starts them—pushes his dad's buttons, as Neil says—he starts them and Neil finishes them, like a real man does.

Billy remembers, less than a fortnight ago, someone else who climbed in through his window, and how much he'd liked that, but—

No. Billy's not used to being ignored by anyone but Harrington. If you were to ask him, he'd say that Harrington's been avoiding him for days, too much of a yellow-belly to face Billy a second time and tell him what his problem is. Billy won't say that it's the other way around—that *he's* the one who's been dodging Steve in the corridors. Avoids parking in his usual spot; it's Steve who parks there now, as if lying in wait. Max has started walking to school with some kid named Jane. Billy's always sick when she needs a ride—like he's caught whatever contagion Steve's got (or maybe it's Steve himself who's the contagion, spreading through Billy like wildfire). Rather than straining things between them further, Max seems lighter,

happier than she's ever been. Billy's not going to deny her that, for once; he's too busy feeling sorry for himself, too busy looking for a place to hide and lick his wounds clean. Laurie's house it is, then.

Until it isn't.

Walking along the banks of Eel Race River, Billy plays a game in which he pretends he's someone else. Neil's taken his car keys as punishment for the incident on Mulberry Street, telling Billy that if he can't act like an adult, then he won't be able to drive like one, either. It fills Billy with a visceral rage at his own helplessness, at his dependency on his father for everything that makes his life worth living. The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh away, or something. Billy hates that he feels lesser without his car, but that's how it is—he doesn't have a lot in his life that he can call *his*, and Neil fucking knows it.

He pretends he's someone like Steve Harrington—someone who has more than temporary substitutes to plug the holes, to keep themselves weighed down, grounded. They used to call Steve *King*, until Billy violently and efficiently dethroned him—but Billy's not fucking stupid. All that shit about kings and queens, it's just that; complete political *bullshit*. Billy may be the new King of the jungle at Hawkins High, but at home he's just Buster. At home, his father is the King, and Billy's scampering around in his shadow, like a mouse that's just trying not to be stepped on. If his classmates find out Neil took away his car keys like he's a fucking child and not seventeen—not *practically* an adult—then they'll turn on him as quickly as they turned on Steve. Worse, they'll fucking *laugh* at him.

Billy tries to pretend he's Harrington—turns up the collar of his leather jacket as if it's a polo shirt and musses up his hair and starts whistling to himself as he walks, like he's Steve fucking Harrington, *hey-howdy man how's it going*, the kids all love him and the girls—the girls want to *marry* him, not change him. The game only lasts for a few seconds before the whistle slows to a crawl on his tongue and he starts looking over his shoulder.

There's something about Eel Race River at sunset—the way the light filters through the treetops and turns the leaves a fiery orange, shimmering and glazed-over, like honey dripping from the comb—

that gives him the creeps.

He's not alone out here.

"Seriously, Harrington?"

"I'm walking," Steve says. Two weeks after Max caught them in his room, Harrington looks even sicker than he did; the shadows have lengthened underneath his eyes, and his skin has taken on this unhealthy, ashy hue that makes Billy think of the pictures he's seen of cancer patients. "That a crime now?"

"By all means," he says, with a false, showy grin. "You stay the fuck out of my business, I'll stay out of yours. *Capisce?*"

"Glad we finally see eye to eye." Steve lowers his foot into the side of the riverbank, then slips with a curse and a flashing of teeth. His hand comes away from where it was hiding inside his jacket, his shirt riding up, and Billy sees something dark and red, smeared across his lower abdomen.

Neil, his brain says at once, *fuck, fuck, fuck, he's gotten to him, he knows—*

"Got into a fight with a dog," Steve says, when he sees Billy looking. "It was a *big* dog," he adds, almost like an afterthought.

His hand brushes against the trunk of the nearest tree, leaving a bloody print on the bark. Billy stares at it, horrified, captivated; oddly protective, because his mouth has touched the place where Harrington's wounded, that's *his* skin to mark—

"A dog did that?" he blurts. "A *dog*? Harrington—"

"You shouldn't be out here." Steve leans against the tree, his legs trembling in a way that's almost undetectable, but Billy doesn't miss it. His senses are attuned to the ticks and quirks of Harrington's being, even all the way out here, under the glow of this wonky orange forest light. "It's not safe. Not in the woods."

"I was walking," Billy says, with another nasty sneer. Bouncing Harrington's words back at him like they're back on the basketball

court and Steve's in his fucking way, stopping him from shooting. "That a crime now?"

"You—" Steve presses his bloodstained hand to the bridge of his nose, exhaling out all his breath at once. "Shit. Just stay out of these trees at night, okay?"

"No one tells me what to do," Billy says, and Harrington rolls his eyes, *big fuckin' whoop*, but he doesn't move, either. Maybe he's in too much pain to move; from the way he's clinging onto the trunk of the tree, his knees sinking lower and lower towards the ground, Billy thinks he might be. "Here," he says, pulling off his jacket. "You have to restrict the blood flow."

"You a doctor?" Steve says dubiously, but he takes the jacket from Billy nonetheless, wrapping it tightly around his waist, wincing as he presses the leather against the ragged, torn flesh of his side. "Now what?"

"We go back to yours. Can you walk?"

Steve's breathing heavily now; Billy can see the sweat beading on his temples like dew drops as he slides further south. "I can crawl. Maybe," he manages. Smiles weakly, apologetically, as if it's all just a bad joke. In a way, it is: Billy's meant to be going to *Laurie's*. Billy's damned if he does, damned if he doesn't.

He steps forward, taking care not to slip on the steep incline of the riverbank. Water chuckles from beyond the trees behind Steve, and Billy thinks there's something almost human in the sound. Steve's Nikes and the hems of his jeans are dark and wet, as if he waded through the river to get here—as if he was trying to *escape* from something.

Unbidden, the old childhood nursery rhyme rises out of Billy's subconscious, glinting like rows of teeth in the depths: *if you see a crocodile, don't forget to scream*.

"Put your arm around me," he says. "C'mon. Let's get out of here."

Steve lets out another exasperated breath. "I don't *need*—"

“Don’t be such a fucking princess. You’re bleeding out.”

“ ‘Tis but a scratch,” Steve says, and Billy’s torn between wanting to laugh at his God awful British accent and wanting to choke him for being such an obstinate bastard.

“Put your arm around me,” he insists. “I’m not fucking joking here, Harrington. If you die, people will blame me for it, and I can’t be assed dealing with that.”

“It’s just a flesh wound,” Steve says, but he reaches out and claps his hand around Billy’s forearm anyway, letting himself be hauled up and over the lip of the bank. “What happened to *you*?” he asks, pointing to Billy’s injured hand; it’s his left one, and coincidentally also the hand he used to jerk Steve off at Eden Cawthorn’s twenty-first birthday party, which seems like a lifetime ago now.

“Got into a fight with a dog,” he says, and gives Steve another grin; this time, it’s closer to his usual one, with more tongue. “Bet mine’s bigger than yours.” *And meaner.*

Steve sucks at the inside of his cheek. “Looks broken. Should go to the hospital.”

“I don’t do hospitals.”

“Neither. But still.” Steve straightens up slightly, adjusting his arm around Billy’s neck so that he’s half-walking, half-shuffling, instead of letting Billy carrying all his weight. “What are you gonna do at practice?”

Billy hadn’t thought of that. He’s never been one to think ahead; he just takes the leap, and to hell with whatever’s waiting for him on the other side. If he stops to think for even half a second about the consequences of his actions, he’ll explode. “You *worried* about me, pretty boy?” he teases. “Didn’t know you cared.”

“You’re an asshole,” Steve says. “I’ve had your dick in my mouth. If that’s not caring, then I don’t—”

“I’ve had my dick in plenty of people’s mouths. Doesn’t mean I care about them.”

He can feel the weight of Steve's eyes blinking up at him in the dying light of the setting sun, the breath and blood whistling in his chest in dreadful tandem. This is what it's like for Billy to be trapped, vulnerable; it feels cold, like the wind moving through the hallways of his insides, cold and exposed and lonely. Harrington clicks his tongue, brisk and dismissive: "You don't fool me, Billy Hargrove."

*

Casa Harrington is the kind of house that Billy, as a chubby ten-year-old from the wrong side of the tracks, would've been deeply envious of: enormous, possibly the biggest building on the block. Once he was old enough to get himself a car, Billy would drive to the richer cities of Los Angeles County, through Beverly Hills where one in three people on the street was a celebrity and the *houses*, man—the houses were as big as castles. Billy would pick out his favorites as he eased up on the gas, parking the Camaro on the side of the road—he'd say to himself, *that one, that's the kind of house I'll live in someday, when I'm rich*. He had no idea how he was going to get rich—that wasn't the point of these daydreams. The *how* was something you thought about later, once you grew the hell up and realized the unfortunate logistics of the thing; the *what*, though, that was the carrot dangling on the stick, the pretty, shiny promise of *more*—of having so much money that he could leave his dad behind for good. Standing in the midst of Hawkins' version of Beverly Hills, Billy's suddenly reminded of these childish fucking daydreams with a painful, crunching *thud*, like the sound a car door makes when it's slammed directly into your hand.

"Where're your parents?" he asks. The house is lit up like a beacon, so bright it hurts to look at, but as far as he can tell, only Steve's car is in the driveway.

"Portugal?" Steve says. "Wait. That's wrong. They're in Morocco, I think."

"You don't know where your folks are?"

"Easy to lose track. They're only home three months a year." Steve shrugs. "My mom goes where my dad goes, and my dad goes where his work tells him to go."

“That’s *normal* for you?”

“Sure. Why?”

“Never mind,” Billy says, but inwardly he’s reeling. He can’t imagine Neil leaving him and Max home alone for nine months at a time—Neil’s obsessed with the idea of *family*, which is synonymous with his ideas of *respect* and *responsibility*, and Billy’s almost certain he would look down on parents like Steve’s with utter contempt.

“You like it?” asks Steve; he’s looking at Billy intently, not like he’s nervous to hear what Billy thinks of his house, but like he’s genuinely curious.

“I mean. It’s nice.” Billy doesn’t know what else to say; of course he fucking likes it, who wouldn’t? It’s big and it’s nice, just like everything else Steve owns. Maybe Neil would want him to hate Steve for it, but Billy—ever the family disappointment—just wants what he *can’t have*.

“Yeah,” says Steve, mouth twisting, “like a picture.”

Pretty like a picture—Steve’s foyer is bigger than Billy’s bedroom and bathroom combined, decorated wall to floor with family photos. Mommy Harrington and Daddy Harrington and itty baby Harrington, three peas in a pod, he thinks; Steve tells him not to look, tells him it’s fucking embarrassing, his mom has them taken every year and she even makes him and his dad wear matching *sweaters*. Billy doesn’t even have a mom, though, so this glimpse into Harrington’s dynamic with his parents fascinates him endlessly, like pressing his nose up against the glass of someone else’s life, a life he’s never had, nor could possibly imagine for himself.

“Take off your shirt,” he says, when they make it to the downstairs bathroom. Steve’s dripping blood on the tiles and Billy’s wondering if Mrs. Harrington has any bleach and vinegar to get the stains out. Blood’s a real bitch to clean, even from hard surfaces.

Steve’s slumped on the toilet seat, eyes almost crossing themselves to keep Billy in focus. “Buy me dinner first.”

Of all the fucking times for Harrington to be difficult—Billy gives Steve a look that Max knows well, blue eyes wide and vivid and upper lip curling, jaw set in a hard, unforgiving line. Max calls it his ‘crazier than a sack of weasels’ look, like Jack Nicholson in *The Shining*, grinning through the door with murderous hilarity: *heeeeeeere’s JOHNNY!* “If you’d rather bleed to death,” he growls.

Steve laughs at that, coldly. “Yeah, why not? Finish what you started, Hargrove.”

“Are you still mad at me, princess?” Billy demands, just as cold. “What the fuck did you want me to say? That I’m a fucking faggot? In *this* town? You’re delusional.”

“Guess that makes two of us, huh?” Steve says, and then he’s pulling off his shirt, wincing and cursing as it sticks to the wound in his side. Billy wants to be angry at him—hell, he wants to *hit* him until Steve fucking gets it. It’s what his father would do, and Neil’s methods are nothing if not effective. He doesn’t hit Steve, though, and he’s not sure why—instead he’s getting on his knees, helping Harrington tug the shirt over his head.

“That’s my favorite fucking shirt,” Harrington says woefully, as Billy throws it into the bathtub with a harsh *slap*.

“That’s my favorite jacket,” Billy says, and for some reason Harrington’s ears turn red.

“Take it back, then.” He holds the leather jacket out to Billy in such an absent, I-couldn’t-care-less sort of way that Billy almost believes it—until he sees the red spreading down his neck.

“Nah, you keep it,” he says, “the blood won’t wash out, anyway.”

“How do you know that?”

Why, because Neil taught me. “I start a lot of fights,” Billy answers. “People say I got a punchable face, Harrington, what d’you reckon?”

“I wouldn’t know.” Steve’s tone is pouty, deliberately insolent. Billy’s reminded of Max, her chin slicing outwards in fierce rebellion: *that’s on you.* “Not like we’ve ever gotten into a fight before.”

“Don’t die on me,” Billy says, “or I’ll beat the shit out of you again.”

Steve’s laughter follows him into the kitchen, and as Billy pulls the first-aid kit down from the top shelf of Mrs. Harrington’s pantry, he thinks that that’s the first time he’s ever heard Steve laugh like that. It solidifies yet another piece of Harrington together with the rest of him; Billy’s working up to the whole picture, but it’s unknown whether Steve will relinquish the other pieces or if he’ll keep them close to his chest, because too much has happened between them already. *That’s on me, too, Maxine*, he thinks.

He pauses before leaving the kitchen, his eyes landing on an elaborately carved cabinet in the living room that no doubt has Mr. Harrington’s prize liquor huddled inside it. Billy imagines a whole crowd of gleaming bottles with crystal stoppers beckoning tantalizingly to him from behind the doors like his true family—for a moment, he almost joins them. It’s been too long since he last had a hit, and he’s *starving*.

No—Billy wants to be sober for this. Whatever *this* is.

“You don’t have to,” Steve says, as Billy washes the blood away from the bites with a wet towel and wrings it clean under the faucet. The sound of running water is thunderous, echoing and bouncing off the cavernous space of the bathroom, and Billy wouldn’t have realized that Harrington was talking to him if he hadn’t been looking at his lips.

“I don’t have nobody,” Billy says. “Not even a friend.”

He keeps his voice quiet, hoping that Harrington will miss it over the noise and the light and the feeling of Billy’s fingers touching him—cleaning and disinfecting the wound, sealing it with adhesive gauze, lingering, ever so slightly, on the bones of his rib cage, tracing previous paths made in the dark—but then Steve leans in and says, “I’ll be your friend.”

Billy looks up. Tries to think of something smartass to toss back at him, like they’re on the court—what was it that he’d told him? *Plant your feet, motherfucker*—and finds himself lacking. Shit. *Shit*.

“You gotta go easier on me, Hargrove,” says Steve. “ ‘Cause right now it’s like—it’s like pulling teeth.”

“I know,” he says, truthfully. Billy doesn’t need to be told what he’s like, he’s been told a thousand times over already, he fucking *knows*. “Sorry.”

How Billy even ended up fucking Steve Harrington before apologizing to him for that night at the Byers’ is beyond him—but Steve’s smiling, like the order doesn’t even matter, and Billy supposes that this means it doesn’t, but—he wants to sneer at Steve, because it’s just so *naïve* of him to—

“It’s okay.” Harrington’s voice is low, indescribably gentle. “Just be honest with me.”

They’ve been dancing around this for weeks.

Not the actual fucking, which Billy thought was going to be the most challenging part, getting Harrington to look past what he did just enough to let him fuck him. Doing it in the dark was the perfect loophole—in the dark, you can’t see yourself, or the face of the person you’re doing it to.

Now, in the light, Billy’s looking at it for the first time, and he’s not going to keep pretending he doesn’t know what it is, because he does, because the face has a name. *Like. I like you. Need. Want. But I can’t have you.* It’s fuckin’ hilarious, but also a little sad. Like when you turn the lights on and see the cracks in the walls, the mould growing in the corners. The instinct to turn away, to shut the door and burn the whole fucking house to the ground, is automatic, steps to a dance he knows off by heart.

Instead of turning away, Billy finds himself leaning forwards. Asks himself, *will he? Won’t he?*

Harrington breathes into him, hands coming up to grip his collar. Not like he wants to fight him. Not anymore. Harrington pulls Billy up until he’s pressed between his legs, hands cupping his face and just *breathing*—lips finding Billy’s and kissing him until Billy feels—oh, Jesus, he feels light, weightless, like he’s floating away—but

Harrington's holding onto him, Harrington's pulling him back with a sigh and a whisper of, "Come to bed," and Billy's words fail him.

Up the stairs, past an endless succession of empty rooms that makes Billy's head spin with the effort of keeping up. Harrington's hand on the back of his neck, pinning him against the bannister to kiss him again. The lights are on up here, too, and it's warm, like stepping into an oven—Billy's shirt is stuck to his back with sweat, but that could be just the carryover effect of Harrington being so close to him, of Harrington in his leather jacket, kissing the air out of him. He feels drunk, delirious; a high unlike anything else, cotton-soft. Safe. He thinks of the way he found Harrington on that first night at Eden's: standing at the edge of the forest, as if keeping watch. He'd stood that way too, at the Byers'. Protector.

"They don't like the light," Steve murmurs, "or the heat," and Billy wonders again what kind of dog could be big enough to leave wounds like that—large and leaf-shaped in Steve's stomach, like lily pads—thinks that the only dog he knows that's big enough is maybe Pete Merrill's German Shepard, the one that went rabid at around the time he arrived in Hawkins. It was bad—they had to put the poor thing down. Shot it right through the throat. The whine and flash of blood as it died, flowing across the grass like a river.

It is the thought of blood—hot, dark, rushing blood—that has him opening his eyes wide, nostrils flaring as he breathes back into Steve. Blood, running so close to the surface of Harrington's skin that Billy can see it, a blush that spreads from his ears to his chest like wine across a pale white tablecloth—he can feel it, every time he tweaks Harrington's nipple and flattens his palm against the throb of his heart. Oh, he's hungry, wanting—it's been *so long*. Billy grabs Harrington's ass with his other hand, thrusts and *holds* their dicks together—he doesn't think he'll ever get tired of rubbing up against Steve's erection through layers of denim, it's so fucking hot—from the way Harrington groans, mouth wet on his ear, it's been a long time for him, too.

Up the stairs, staggering into Harrington's room. Even warmer than the stairwell. Steve goes still in his arms, and Billy sees that the flush has spread to his face. "I'm stupid," he says, "really fuckin' stupid."

“What?”

“That’s why I hated you,” Steve says, and Billy sees what’s on his desk: tottering stacks of books, dog-eared, spines collapsing, Post-It notes spilling out of the sides in flashes of pink and green and yellow. *Ground Zero: Oppenheimer & The Fall of Hiroshimas* sits with its pages splayed, but the words look funny to Billy close up; they’re typed in careful, circular script, like the kinds of letters you’d find in children’s books, watered-down, sanitized. A poster of Albert Einstein, mouth pulled into a cynical, wink-wink nudge-nudge grin, with the caption *I Put The Sexy In Dyslexia!* Something cracks under his foot and Billy looks down—cassette tapes, hundreds of them, scattered across Steve’s floor. *Frankenstein*—*M. Shelley*, reads one. *The Denial of Death*—*E. Becker* reads another.

Billy raises his head and sees Steve watching him, wary, uncertain. Nervous now, instead of curious. Thinks to himself that this is something Steve’s probably been dancing around, too.

“Steve. Babe,” he tries; *Harrington* doesn’t feel right, not now, “Don’t. You’re not—”

“I can’t *fucking* read,” Steve bursts out angrily. “You know what Tommy calls people who can’t read? *Retarded*. Imagine if he knew. *King* Steve, who can’t read a sentence to save himself unless it’s double-spaced—”

“Tommy’s a dickhead,” Billy says, and Steve’s face twitches, like he wants to laugh but can’t quite muster the sound. “Who gives a shit what he thinks?”

“You do. You’re *his* friend.”

“I told you. I don’t have any friends. Tommy hates my fucking guts.”

“You don’t get it,” Steve says, pouty and resentful again. “What would you know? You don’t have to work for *any* of this, man. I see words backwards. Sometimes I can’t even put two ends of a word together, something’s always missing in the middle. I try to write the letters down so I can get the feel of them, but then I can’t even *understand* what I wrote. That’s how bad it is.” His mouth twists and

pulls at itself like it wants to jump right off his face. "I can't read for shit. My girlfriend left me for another guy and I never even saw it coming, so I guess that means I can't read people for shit, either."

Huh. Billy's starting to understand Harrington more and more now, whether he wants him to or not. "You think I'm Nancy?"

Steve's shoulders lower in a helpless slump. "Maybe. I dunno," he says, casting a long, bleak look around his room. "I can't make head or tails of *anything*, these days. I have to work twice as hard as everyone else to catch up, to make fuckin' sense of what's going on, and even then, I'm outta my depth."

"And this?" Billy nudges *The Denial of Death* with his foot. He's not stupid, although he pretends he is. Blink and you miss it. Ernest Becker's work has Billy Hargrove's name written all over it: live forever or die trying, baby. "Immortality projects, terror management theory? You're too young to think about any of that shit." *Too whole.*

"You ever had a near-death experience?" Steve asks him, and Billy's not sure if that's a trick question, because death has been on his doorstep ever since the boys in California. Death, wearing his father's face, destroyer of worlds. "I'm tryin' to make sense of that, too."

"Is it working?"

"Some things you just can't make sense of," says Steve, "things that shouldn't be."

Here are the things that should not be: Steve, obsessive-compulsive, isolated, bent out of shape from whatever happened to him. Steve, sick, hunched over, so different from the Steve he thought he knew, nothing but pretend-play, just as the Billy that girls think they know is pretend-play. Billy's fucked boys. Billy's cheated death multiple times, and he'll do it again, and again, until death catches up with him; his very own immortality project, tailored to suit his needs.

"Steve," he says. *None* of that should be, yet it is. The wicked, unfair way of the world. "Come to bed. Please."

Steve, shoulders slumping and then rising, like a man rousing himself

from sleep. His grip on Billy's waist is tenuous, ginger; a reminder that they're both a little broken and hurting, and it's best to take this slow.

Billy's coming into terms with that, with going slow. He's lived fast and hard all his life, seen himself go *splat*, like a bug on a windshield, too many times to count; what Harrington needs right now is the opposite. Maybe there's a part of Billy, a part that's wired deeper than the pain in his bruised, swollen hand—pain that purely exists to remind him *rise and shine, you are alive*—that needs it, too. Steve, tenuous, ginger, pushing him down onto the mattress. Billy tries not to think of Nancy Wheeler as he breathes the smell of the comforter in—instead, he recalibrates the smell as *Steve*, a force of nature rather than individual traces of musk and sweat and perfume, whatever.

They're still dressed but that's okay. It's lazy, the movement of Steve's hips against his own. He seems to enjoy rubbing himself up against Billy just as much as Billy likes doing it to him; his back arches and he nuzzles Billy's neck as he holds his cock against his inner thigh, like a cat against a scratching post. "How do you wanna do this?" he whispers. Thrusts his hips forward, drags his cock up, up, until it meets Billy's—each of them making shocked noises at how *hard* the other is, as if each time of discovery is the first time.

"You've never done this before," Billy says.

"I'm not a *virgin*," Steve says, but that's not what Billy means, and he knows it.

"Never got that far with Wheeler, huh?" Billy props his chin up with his uninjured hand. "Lemme guess. She only wanted to do it in missionary, and only when she felt like it. Which was, what, once in a blue moon?"

"That's none of your fucking business."

Billy smiles, tongue wagging and eyes glinting like daggers of spun glass. "Her loss, Steverino. Get over here."

He pulls Steve underneath him, rolling until Billy's perched in his lap, like a gift. All in one go, without slowing the movement of his hips;

Steve gasps, his eyes widening until they're like twin pools, an inky blackness that Billy could fall into, and keep falling, lather, rinse, repeat. "Shit," Steve says. "We're really doing this, aren't we? Fuck me."

"No, *fuck me*," Billy says, and Steve moans, mouth coming down to lap at the sweat on his neck. Foreheads sticking together like they're conjoined; not a snake eating its own tail, but a snake with two heads, wrapped around each other so tightly it's hard to see where one body ends and the other body starts. "Yes, baby, yes. I know you got it in you. You're gonna fuck me until I can't even fucking *stand*. Mmm, you like the sound of that, don't you?"

"You kiss your mother with that mouth?" But Steve's voice is shaking, his fingers hot and tight and clawing at Billy's biceps with increasing urgency: *hurry up*. Billy doesn't *want* to hurry, though; he wants to take his time, to breathe it in without the fear of getting caught: the sensation of Harrington's fingers giving him goosebumps, raising the pale, fine hairs on his arms into exclamation points.

"I kiss *your* mother," he says. Suddenly overwhelmed, not knowing what to do aside from playing the part of the cocky douchebag, which always feels comfortable, *right*. Like a pair of well-worn shoes.

"Uh-huh." Steve's breath is shallow as he yanks at his zipper, pulling his cock out of his jeans and squeezing at the tip impatiently. "You talk so much shit. You want me to fuck you, Hargrove? Fuck you fast and mean, like *you're* the bitch?"

Billy laughs, long and deep, but he's not going to say that that's *exactly* what he wants—for Harrington to push his fangs right through him, to hollow him out until he can't feel anything but Steve, constant. *Ladies and gentlemen, the eighth wonder of the world*, he thinks as he watches Steve touch himself, hips rising so he can get a better view.

"You're catching flies," Steve says, with a little smile and a moan; he flicks Billy playfully on the chin with his finger, pushing it into his open mouth so Billy can taste him, bitter and a little salty, with his tongue. Tease.

"I'll be better than any bitch you've had, baby," he hears himself purr finally, a delayed reaction. "Promise. Pussy will feel too loose for you after you've been in me. You won't ever be able to get off in that way again."

Steve's hips kick upwards at the sound of his voice, cockhead glistening and pink as it flies even more desperately between his fingers. "Put your money where your mouth is," he says, sliding his other arm under his neck, using it to prop his head up so that his lips are inches away from Billy's. "Lube's in the nightstand. Unless you're afraid I'll turn you *gay*."

"You're not gonna let me live that down, are you?"

"You were being stupid," Steve says in his ear, hand slowing a little. "You were doing it on purpose. Laurie fuckin' Powell, really?"

"I don't have a choice," Billy says. "I don't like it. Laurie—shit." The fuck is he explaining himself for? He's never needed to explain himself. Not to Max, certainly not to *Steve*. "I fuckin' *hate* it. But it's what people expect, okay? And you gotta give the people what they want, otherwise they'll tear you to shreds. What would you do, if you were me?"

"I dunno. In what world is it easier to be feared than loved?"

Billy says, "Machiavelli. The end justifies the means."

Steve ponders that for a long minute. Then he says slowly, ruefully, "Guess it's just another one of those things I'll never be able to make sense of."

Billy turns his head, so that his lips are resting against Harrington's pulse. Feels Steve go rigid against him, the hand in his pants unmoving, anticipatory.

"It's not on you to make sense of," he tells him. "My dad—my dad says I can be a real piece of work."

It's the first time he's mentioned Neil around Steve and he watches for his reaction, waiting for Steve to prod and poke at him further, like the nurse at the hospital, her eyes beady and her lips pursed as

she pressed the stethoscope to his chest cavity: *What about your dad, honey? Does he touch you in a bad way?* Billy hadn't known what the fuck she was talking about—how could touch from a *parent* be bad? But then she'd explained to him the difference between good touches and bad touches, and that he's not supposed to let his dad touch him in a bad way. In fact, he's supposed to *scream*.

Then again, maybe Harrington's not really a family-oriented person, because he just nips affectionately at Billy's nose and says, "What were you saying about me fucking you?"

"Lube," says Billy, lifting his head. Rocks back against Steve's cock until he feels it pulse in response. He doesn't want to think about Neil, not tonight. Not ever, if he can help it. "*Now*."

For once, Steve doesn't argue.

"Billy, holy fuck." He cranes his neck as Billy sinks one slicked-up finger into himself, hands clenching into the muscle of his thighs. Eyes wider and darker than Billy's ever seen them, almost child-like with disbelief at what's in front of him. "You should see yourself."

"Rather—rather see you," Billy pants back, and Harrington cocks his head at him, mouth dropping open in wonderous, joyful understanding—

"You wanna keep the lights on this time?"

Billy only moans, raspy and wanton, as he fucks himself with his fingers. Injured hand coming down to plant itself in the folds of Steve's neck, stroking, squeezing, until Steve's Adam's apple rolls under his palm. Steve swallows and Billy mimics him, thinking how he was accustomed to Steve's body in the dark, but now they're going to have to start over. Relearn each other from scratch, this time under the light. Billy's not sure if the thought thrills or scares the ever-loving shit out of him. All the best thrills have an element of danger to them, after all.

"It's okay," Steve says. "Billy—let it happen."

He sits up, cradling Billy to his chest, coaxing him forwards so that

Billy's on his knees, looking down at him. Helpless, free-falling—Steve snakes his arm around, touches the small of his back to let him know that he's there, that it's okay, he's not going anywhere—then creeps lower. Replaces Billy's fingers with his own. In and out. *Just breathe*, Steve's wide, dark eyes tell him.

"Steve," Billy half-groans, half-sighs. Brushes Steve's bangs back from his face, shoves his thumb into the fold of his lips as Steve crooks his finger deep into that special spot. "P-pretty. Gonna—gonna come if you keep doing that."

"Oh, *no*," Steve whispers, and kisses the lines of sweat collecting along the muscles of his belly. Presses his finger in and holds, waiting for Billy to collect his breath before moving again, picking up the pace. Billy gasps when he feels a sudden, unexpected pressure on his cock—Steve's other hand gripping him, steady and sure.

"Sadist," he says, and Steve only flutters his eyelashes innocently, as if to say, *who, me?*

"I like when you call me pretty." Steve presses another kiss to his stomach, right above his belly button, and Billy tries not to shudder at the touch—he's always been ticklish there, and he has a bad feeling that Steve's already figured this out, the manipulative little shit.

"What else do you like?" Self-discipline be damned, Billy's thrusting into Steve's palm, both of them fixated, as if hypnotized, on the movement of Billy's hips, the *sounds* his cock makes as it seeks the friction of Steve's fist.

"I like your legs the best," Steve says. He withdraws his finger from Billy with a soft *pop*, gives his ass a squeeze and a light smack. Kisses lower, at the juncture where his inner thigh meets his groin; this time, Billy can't repress his shiver. "I like your tan lines. Your stretch marks." He sighs, almost dreamily, hand still caressing the curve of Billy's ass. "There's—there's a lot to like."

Fucking hell, Billy could come from Steve's praise alone. "Enough," he says with another groan, hair hanging moist and heavy in his eyes, "baby, I'm ready for you."

Steve's eyes gleam, triumphant, and he practically pounces on Billy, kissing and licking at his mouth and jaw and neck and nipples and—just his fucking *everywhere*, and Billy is on the verge of giving in, of letting go of all control in favor of being bowled over by the tide that is Steve Harrington, carried out to sea, even though it goes against his very nature to do so: the instinct to be hard, stoic, to plant his feet and not fucking budge for anything or anyone. Steve never plants his fucking feet; he's free and easy-going, like water, cool and gentle and soothing on Billy's sharp, angry edges, wearing them away.

Steve's dick brushes against his hole, catching on the rim, and Steve hesitates—he looks up at Billy, who just stares at the poster of Albert Einstein above the bed. “For fuck's sake,” he says flatly. “Hate when you go all *noble* on me.”

“Just checking in.” Steve thrusts up between Billy's ass cheeks, testing, reserved, then pulls away. “You really want this?”

Billy reaches down and grips the base of Steve's cock. “Use me,” he says. “Give me all you fucking got.”

When Harrington doesn't move—God, he's so fucking gentle, killing him with kindness—Billy makes a show of lowering himself onto Steve's cock. He knows he looks good like this, with his head tilted back and chest pushed out, each well-defined muscle in his body straining under the light, shining with sweat. “Show-off,” Steve says, his voice choked. Billy's halfway down on his cock and is not going to stop anytime soon.

“You love it,” Billy says, and Steve snorts—a sound that spirals and fades, with no real venom to it.

“Slower,” he warns, hands coming up to still Billy's hips. “You're fucking *tight*.”

“Toldja.” Billy grins at him, wild, boyish. Grinds his hips down, grin widening as a loud, explosive whine rips from Steve's throat. “Gonna wake the neighbours if you carry on like that.”

“Fuck the neighbors,” Steve says, and starts thrusting in slow circles, until Billy can feel him inching deeper into his body, spearing him in

two. Steve's thrusts speed up, arms wrapping themselves around Billy's shoulders, pulling him down so that he's locked in the space between Steve's chin and his collarbone and Harrington's fucking up and into him, not so gentle anymore. Billy feels something like ecstasy start to boil in his blood, building and building, and he thinks of the fireworks they set off over the quarry, the way the Roman Candles had gone up with a hissing *whoosh* and painted the night in hot, fiery streaks of red and blue, how the Catherine wheels had spun and howled and shot off rainbow sparks, atoms fizzing and colliding and burning out in kaleidoscopic whorls of infinite destruction, and how Steve had stood next to him through it all, tall and thin and unyielding—the way water can be unyielding sometimes, when it gets all stormy. Billy hadn't been able to see his face but he knew his hand was somewhere next to his, and he'd wanted so badly to reach out and take it for himself, just like he took everything else. Their little secret, burning between them, warming the skin of their faces.

He never did hold Steve's hand, but he does now. Pushes himself upwards so that Steve's back to holding his hips and Billy's the one pinning him down, threading his fingers into Steve's and riding his cock with manic, tight-lipped concentration, because he knows that there's a way of letting people use you so that you're really using them, and that's where true power lies.

"I'm close," Steve whispers, "*Billy*. Look at me."

His fingers hook around Billy's chin—role reversal, how the tables have turned—and Billy's breath hitches in his chest, leaning alarmingly towards a sob—Harrington's eyes catching on him like burrs, itchy and stinging to the point of being unbearable. Try as he might, Billy can't look away. "I see you," he says. "Oh, Steve. Baby."

"Yeah," says Steve, wrecked. Finger slipping into Billy's mouth, letting him suckle on it like the forbidden fruit it is. "I see you, too."

*

Afterwards, they lie in Steve's bed, passing a cigarette back and forth and listening to the first chapter of *The Denial of Death* on Steve's cassette player. The words are easier to process when they're in auditory form, Steve tells him. When they're written down, they tend

to give him the slip.

“Are you afraid of dying?” Billy asks him. He still doesn’t really understand the significance of *this* book, of all the books that Steve could be trying to wrap his pretty little head around.

It’s such a long time before Steve answers that Billy thinks it’s not going to happen, that he doesn’t have a right to that yet, but then it does happen. “No,” he says. “I’m afraid for other people. People I care about.”

“There’s your mistake,” Billy says. “Once you have something to care for, you’re a goner.”

“Guilty,” Steve says, and is quiet again, staring up at the smoke that curls in the air above them like a question mark, wrapping around the mysterious, runic letters of an alphabet he still can’t quite get the hang of.

“I could read to you,” Billy says finally, “if they have the hard copy at the library.”

He tells Steve about Mrs. Gale, who said that he’s good at telling stories. She even asked him to read aloud in front of the class once or twice, because he has a nice voice and he knew how to make the other kids laugh at all the right parts. Mrs. Gale was a direct contradiction to all the things Neil tells him, which usually involves something along the lines of *you talk too fuckin’ much, no one likes a motor mouth*. Billy hasn’t had a mother in years, but he thinks that Mrs. Gale’s probably the only woman who’s ever come close.

“She sounds like she was cool,” Steve says.

“She was the best teacher I’ve ever had.” Billy sits up, indifferent to the sheet that falls from his naked chest as he crushes the cigarette into the already-overflowing ash tray on the nightstand. “I’m being serious, you know. I’ll read to you.”

“What am I, six years old?” But Harrington’s smiling, and it’s soft and sleepy in the exact way Billy’s imagined. “I’d like that. You *do* have a great voice.”

Billy lies back down, embedding himself into the warmth of Harrington's body. Throws his arm over his chest, just so he can feel the steady, powerful beat of his heart, coming and going like a wave on some distant, night-cloaked shore. Billy's getting used to this, too—just sitting, and listening. He thinks he could get used to it eventually, if he tries really hard not to snap. *You're not stupid, Billy*, Mrs. Gale told him, whenever he came to school with his clothes rumpled and the blood caked around his nostrils, *you can do anything you put your mind to*.

"Hey," Steve says. "Where did you go?"

"Oppenheimer had the wrong idea," he says. "He thought you had to kill the world to save it, but—but he never thought about *after*." Men like J. Robert Oppenheimer—like Neil Hargrove—never do, he thinks. They just want to be the biggest bullies in the playground, although they'll tell you it's for your own good even as they kick your teeth in. Perhaps Billy himself is the same—how many times has he told Max that *I'm doing this because we're family, you should be fucking grateful*? "S'pose I'm thinking about creation, not destruction. If that's even possible."

The sound of Harrington's heartbeat, mingling with his own. Life, not death. Harrington's face is close to his, mouth crinkling at the corners, and Billy remembers when Harrington couldn't even open his eyes properly because they were so messed up from the bruising. Billy's not sure if they're past that—while the sex is fuckin' out of this world, it doesn't change anything, not really—but it's a start. Creation, in the aftermath of destruction.

"I think that's one of the most honest things you've ever come up with," says Steve.

Billy makes a non-committal noise, pressing his face into the hollow of Steve's neck. "Don't get used to it."

"Yeah, yeah." Steve's laughing now, pulling Billy to him and kissing him with all the giddiness of someone young and carefree—and that's how it *should* be. "I told you, asshole. You don't fool me."